

AMENDMENTS TO THE SPECIFICATION

(1) Please amend paragraph [0054] as follows:

[0054] FIGS. 15A and 15B ~~illustrate~~ illustrates variations of an eighth embodiment of a fastener ~~200~~200A, 200B according to the invention. One difference between fasteners ~~fastener~~ 200A, 200B ~~200~~ and those shown and described above is that the ~~fastener~~ fasteners 200A, 200B are ~~is~~ substantially in the shape of a ball. By "ball" is meant those classes of shapes that are convex and generally round in shape and may be made up of one or more curved surfaces and/or include surfaces which are planar. Thus, as defined herein, "ball" includes but is not limited to the following shapes: sphere (FIG. 15A and 15B), prolate spheroid (FIG. 16), oblate spheroid (FIG. 17), regular convex polyhedra where the base polygon is at least a pentagon, i.e. a dodecahedron (FIG. 18C), icosahedron (FIG. 18A), and any other shapes, e.g. geodesic domes, that approximate a sphere (such as the shapes shown in FIGS. 18B, and 18D-18F), or approximate the shapes of prolate spheroid or oblate spheroid.

(2) Please amend paragraph [0055] as follows:

As shown in FIGS. 15A and 15B, the ~~fastener 200~~ fasteners 200A, 200B ~~are~~ is a solid, or alternatively, hollow member having a ball shape. FIG 15A illustrates an isometric view of a spherical fastener 200A, while FIG. 15B illustrates a cross section view of the fastener 200A in FIG. 15A taken along Line 15B-15B, if the opening 216A of fastener 200A were altered to include a cylindrical opening 216B having a countersink. Both fasteners 200A, 200B include a first portion 212 (i.e., a first engaging surface 212) for engaging a picket, and a second portion 214 (i.e., a mating surface 214) for engaging a second article, such as a rail to which the picket is

to be attached. ~~Desirably~~For both fasteners 200A, 200B, a top surface 218 and an opposite bottom surface 220 are substantially flat, to facilitate ease of placement and assembly onto a facing surface of an item, e.g. a rail. The fasteners 200A, 200B ~~are fastener 200~~ is desirably fabricated as a single piece of a uniform material for ease of fabrication. Exemplary materials include nylon, plastics, polyvinyl chloride, and other deformable materials including but not limited to synthetic rubber and polyurethane. The fasteners 200A, 200B ~~fastener 200~~ preferably ~~includes~~ include a first set of ridges 211 disposed on an exterior surface of a ~~the~~ first portion 212 or first engaging surface 212 thereof, for use in frictionally engaging an interior surface of a cylindrical opening provided in a longitudinal end of a picket or baluster. The maximum dimensions of the ridges of the fasteners 200A, 200B ~~fastener 200~~ are preferably selected to be slightly larger than the internal dimensions of the opening in the picket, e.g. by an amount on the order of hundredths of an inch along the diameter of the ridges, such that the ridges frictionally engage the interior surface of the opening in the picket and stay engaged despite stresses that the assembled rail and picket may encounter later. In such case, the fasteners 200A, 200B ~~fastener 200~~ and/or the ridges 211 are fabricated of a material and thickness such that some deformation of the ridges and/or the underlying ball occurs upon inserting the fasteners 200A, 200B ~~fastener 200~~ into the opening of the picket.

(3) Please amend paragraph [0057] as follows:

A stop 222 may be provided on the exterior surface of the fasteners 200A, 200B ~~fastener 200~~ between the first and second portions 212, 214, for use in stopping the fastener from being inserted too deeply into one or the other of the picket and the rail to which it is being joined. While the fasteners 200A, 200B ~~are fastener 200~~ is desirably fabricated in one piece and of

uniform material throughout, the first and second portions 212, 214, or other components of fasteners 200A, 200B ~~fastener 200~~ may be constructed of different materials or different pieces of the same or similar materials and then assembled to make the fastener.

(4) Please amend paragraph [0058] as follows:

The fasteners 200A, 200B ~~are fastener 200~~ is preferably provided with an aperture 216A, 216B on at least one end thereof, the aperture preferably being sized and shaped to accommodate standard-sized tools such as those of rectangular cross-section (opening 216A in FIG. 200A), e.g. a rectangular nut driver or socket wrench, or those having other cross-sections, e.g. hexagonal drivers, also known as "Allen" wrenches, for example. In such case, the aperture 216A provides a way of applying torque to insert a lower portion 214 of the fastener 200A into an item such as a rail.

(5) Please amend paragraph [0059] as follows:

[0059] Alternatively, the aperture-216 may be a countersink, such as the aperture 216B shown in FIG. 200B, for retaining a screw or bolt of length sufficient to pass through the fastener 200B from the side of the aperture 216B to the opposite side, the screw or bolt then threadably engaging another item, e.g. the rail thereunder.

(6) Please amend paragraph [0060] as follows:

[0060] Alternatively, to facilitate turning of the fastener, at least one end of the fasteners 200A, 200B ~~fastener 200~~ may be provided with a bolthead (such as that shown and described above relative to FIG. 12) in the place of aperture 216A, 216B, the bolthead being desirably

formed integrally to a top surface 218 of the fasteners 200A, 200B~~fastener 200~~. In such case, the bolthead provides a way of applying torque to insert a lower portion 214 of the fasteners 200A, 200B~~fastener 200~~ into an item such as a rail.

(7) Please amend paragraph [0061] as follows:

[0061] In a preferred method of assembling a picket to a rail to form an element of a railing or balustrade, the fasteners 200A, 200B~~fastener 200~~ is placed, bottom side 220 down on a rail, leaving the top surface 218 exposed. The body of a screw or bolt is threadably inserted into or, alternatively, passed through the fasteners 200A, 200B~~fastener 200~~ to threadably engage the rail below, while the screwhead, bolthead, or tool-receiving aperture 216A, 216B of the fasteners 200A, 200B~~fastener 200~~ remains accessible from a top surface 218 to allow torque to be applied to affix the fastener to the rail. Thereafter, a cooperating opening of the picket is then inserted over the fasteners 200A, 200B~~fastener 200~~ to affix the picket to the rail. The cooperating opening can have a variety of shapes such as cylindrical, conical, rectangular, hexagonal or other regular polygon, as well as in the shape of a half-ball or section of a ball, as that term is defined herein.

(8) Please amend paragraph [0062] as follows:

[0062] To continue making a balustrade, the process is then repeated by affixing fasteners ~~200~~200A, 200B at desired spacings, and affixing pickets thereto to make an assembly having a rail and a plurality of pickets affixed thereto. This represents a "lower" rail of the balustrade, for example. Then, fasteners ~~200~~200a, 200B are affixed to a second rail at desired spacings. The balustrade is then completed by mating the pickets that are affixed to the lower rail to the

fasteners ~~200-200A, 200B~~ that are affixed to the second, upper rail.

(9) Please amend paragraph [0063] as follows:

[0063] While in many railings or balustrades the pickets or balusters are oriented at right angles, many occasions arise when pickets must be oriented at other than right angles, e.g. stairways, in which case at least one of the angles that the baluster makes relative to the rail is acute. The ball-shape of fasteners ~~200-200A, 200B~~ makes them well-suited for this purpose because the angle that each ball-shaped fastener ~~200-200A, 200B~~ makes relative to the opening in a picket can change while the fastener still continues to frictionally engage the opening.